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*The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain*

By Brett Christophers

London: Verso Books, 2018

From Oakland to Barcelona to Berlin, housing activists are demanding the resocialization of housing and engaging in insurgent practices of reclaiming housing from corporate landlords. In contesting the outsize economic power enjoyed by actors that control cities and neighborhoods via the housing sector, such movements speak directly to the concerns of *The New Enclosure*, Brett Christophers' pathbreaking analysis of the post-1970s privatization of public land in the UK. One of the foremost practitioners of Marxian political economy in geography today, Christophers shows how the past four decades of land privatization constitute a neoliberal-era analog to the primitive accumulation of Britain's original enclosure movement. Christophers asserts privatization as *the* hallmark of neoliberalism, arguing the scale of enclosure (privatization made spatial) since 1979 should make land central to our understanding of late capitalism in one of neoliberalism's heartlands. Nonetheless, land has rarely featured in public debate about privatization in the UK. This detailed analysis of the scale and profound social, political, and economic impacts of putting public land in private hands will undoubtedly change the terms of that debate. Even more importantly, *The New Enclosure* demonstrates that proposals to redistribute property ownership are precisely what is needed to counter problems of "market failure, iniquity and inequality, economic disorder, and social dislocation" (p. 38) that deepen with the growth of private landownership.

Organized into five substantive chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, *The New Enclosure* begins with two chapters of scene-setting. Chapter One theorizes the general significance of landownership and addresses the implications of a shift from public to private landownership in a capitalist system. An especially important point—and one that Christophers drives home with his analysis—is how private ownership privileges the imperatives of accumulation over other, possibly more socially beneficial, uses of land. Chapter Two examines the history of landownership in the UK, with local and central government ownership of UK land peaking at 20% at the end of the 1970s.

Owing a deep debt to the late Doreen Massey's work with Alejandrina Catalano on changes in dominant forms of private landownership in Britain just before Margaret Thatcher took power in 1979, *The New Enclosure* is concerned with making visible the discourses and mechanisms by which vast amounts of public land has been transferred into private ownership in the intervening decades, and with what results. The three chapters that respectively delve into these themes are the main substance of the book, and the dogged analysis conveys just how much of a project privatization is. As *The New Enclosure* progresses, it dawns upon the reader that the state has invested decades underwriting private accumulation with the most finite public commodity of all—land. This process has not been seamless or instantaneous, nor has it gone uncontested, but it has nevertheless reshaped Britain's trajectory of social, political, and economic development in fundamental ways.

As elaborated in Chapter 3, the project of privatization necessitated a logic of public land as surplus. This logic assumes that public bodies, due to “the absence of profit-driven, market-based

mechanisms of allocation and use” (p. 126), cannot possibly make efficient use of land and property. Through the disciplining influence of private ownership then, the sale of public land will: create revenue and fiscal benefits; avoid the alleged drag on development associated with surplus land; and generate wider public gains through economic growth, job creation, and increased housing supply. Obscured by this logic is what public landownership affords beyond the functioning of the private market, and how privatization prevents public bodies, in Massey’s words, from behaving “as socially conscious landowners” (quoted p. 153). The logic and discourse of privatization has been remarkably persistent, despite obvious holes, such as higher rates of surplus ownership in the private versus public sector, including the already large amounts of land—with planning permission in place—held by major developers; the fact that a service-dominated economy like Britain does not require large amounts of land to support economic growth; the unsuitability of much public land for purposes such as housebuilding; and the disparity between how sitting on land is understood as wasteful for public bodies but as an investment for market actors.

Implementing privatization has required addressing challenges to public bodies ‘creating’, identifying, and disposing of surplus land to the private sector, the focus of Chapter 4.

Government has sought to persuade public bodies of the cost of holding land by applying asset rents and setting space reduction targets, imposing a particular yardstick that conflicts with core activities of the public sector (especially relating to support for social reproduction and infrastructure provision). Of urgent importance to the project of privatization has been constructing calculative devices to produce and organize the information about surplus land necessary to sell it. Thus, land registries are one of the longest running tools of privatization—

going back to the 1980 Local Government Planning and Land Act and ultimately codified through numerous disclosure initiatives that create a high administrative burden of transparency. While the public sector must carry this burden, the private sector is held to a lesser standard, enabling buyers of public land to shield themselves from scrutiny, e.g. through buying via corporate entities based in offshore tax havens.

Government has relied on a series of ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ to dispose of surplus land. The former includes ongoing pressure on public bodies (e.g. through curtailing budgets) that keeps dispositions coming, despite the demonstrated lack of value for money in many sales. The primary carrot for public bodies is the prospect of retaining the proceeds from sales, but this possibility has been increasingly squeezed over time in ways that make it less compelling, necessitating the use of threat and compulsion to combat reluctance. Ensuring the sale of surplus land to the private sector specifically has been achieved by putting up obstacles to disposing of land for less than market value (despite policies ostensibly encouraging non-monetary sale considerations) and actively supporting private buyers (e.g. requiring land to be sold with planning permission already in place.) Overall, implementing privatization is a process marked by opacity for the public, who have had little opportunity to express their views about or shape the course of privatization.

Christophers estimates that approximately 10% of land in Britain has undergone privatization since the end of the 1970s. In other words, half of public land has been lost to the private market in that time, affecting local authorities much more than central government, and transferring as much as £400 billion in value to the private sector. As Chapter 5 explores in depth, contrary to

the assumptions about the benefits of privatization, this process has not created value for money, community benefits, new homes, or market efficiency. Rather, its consequences have been more pernicious. Major developers now sit on extensive land banks rather than building homes to keep up with demand, a symptom of the larger transformation of the UK into what Christophers describes as “a rentier-capitalist economy” (p. 305) where rent from real estate is the chief source of economic growth. Unsurprisingly, privatization has led to social dislocation: the consequence of both market actors applying market logics to once-public land, and of removing the possibilities of non-market ownership rationalities, e.g. the provision of social centers, meaningfully affordable housing, and “truly public, freely accessible public space” (p. 314).

Through skewering the flawed logic, contradictions, and destructive consequences of land privatization in the UK, *The New Enclosure* convincingly demonstrates the need to think—and act—differently about land and its ownership. Is state expropriation and re-nationalization the answer? Political feasibility aside, as Christophers notes, “To justify public landownership, public landowners must behave differently from private landowners” (p. 338). Perhaps forms of community ownership that re-socialize land and housing and more closely involve the public in land stewardship are closer to what is called for. As such rationalities of ownership more often erupt in the face of systemic collapse and entrenched social oppression, we may be closer to re-socialization than we think.

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